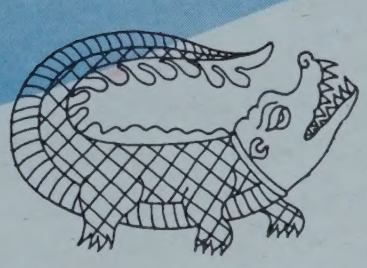
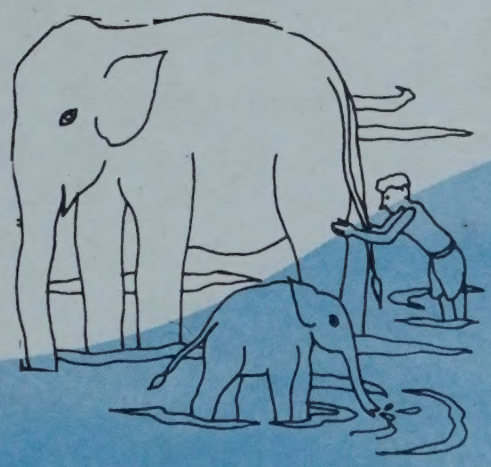
READ AND COLOUR RIVER STORIES

The story of Ganga





written by **Priya Krishnan**
illustrated by **Uma Krishnaswamy**

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Read and Colour River Stories

The Story of Ganga
The Story of Brahmaputra
The Story of Narmada
The Story of Kaveri

Written by Priya Krishnan
Series editor Deeya Nayar

Read and Colour Freedom Stories

The Story of Tipu Sultan
The Story of Rani of Jhansi
The Story of Dandi March
The Story of 15th August 1947

Written by Saṇdhya Rao
Series editor Radhika Menon

The Story of Ganga (English)

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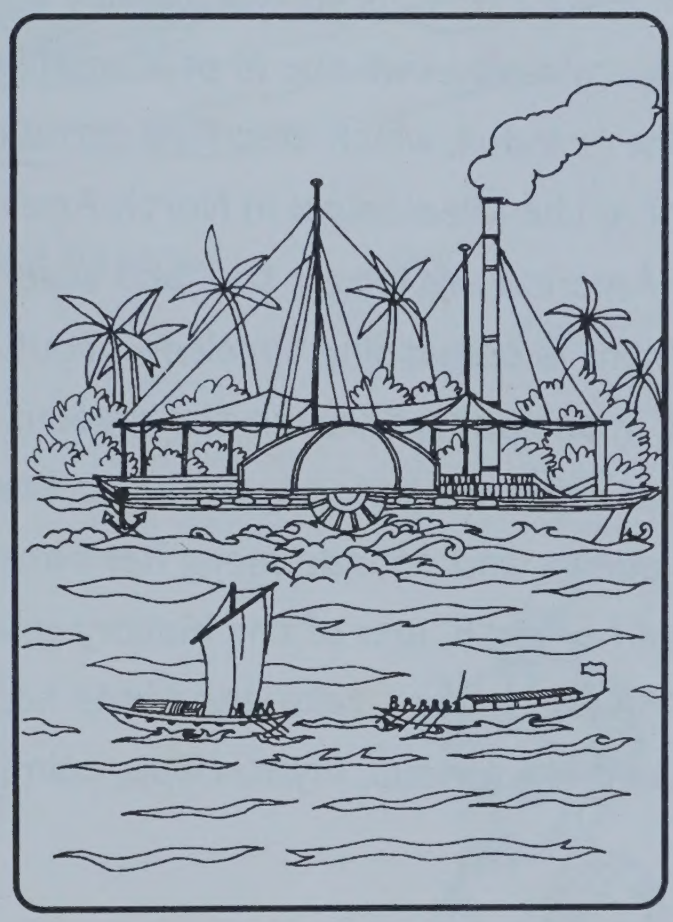
READ AND COLOUR RIVER STORIES

THE STORY OF GANGA



written by PRIYA KRISHNAN

illustrated by UMA KRISHNASWAMY

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Tulika

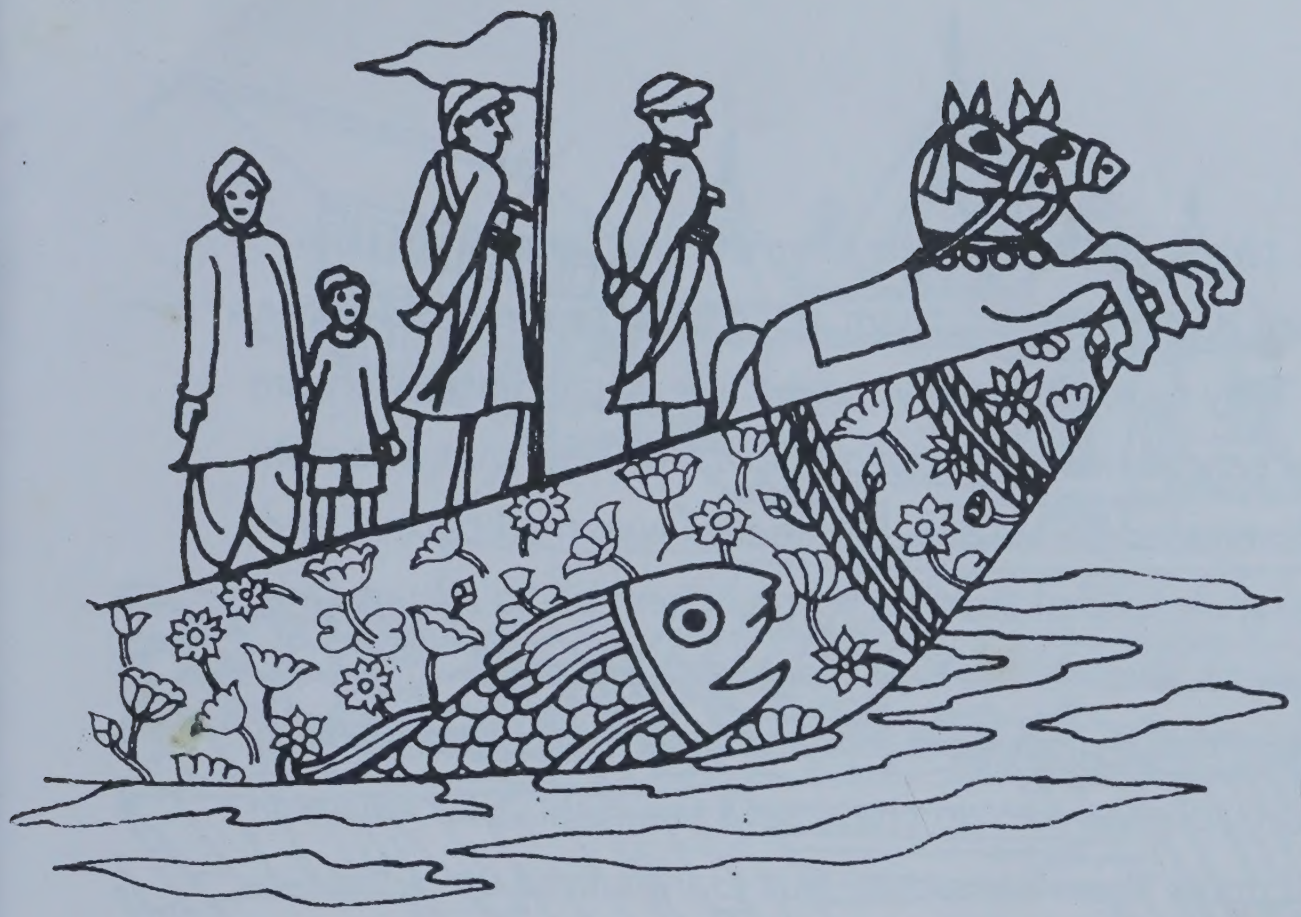
Long long ago, our ancestors settled along rivers. There was plenty of water and rich soil for plants, animals and people to survive. The river was the mother who cared for them.

This is how many artists and sculptors see the river Ganga. In paintings and statues she is often shown as a woman who rides Makara, a crocodile, carrying a plate of food and an overflowing pot of water. Perhaps this means that she gives life to everything and everyone along her 2,400 km course, her journey to the sea.

She travels a long way, but she is still smaller in size than the rivers Brahmaputra or Indus, which also flow through India. Other rivers like the Nile in Africa, the Mississippi in North America and the Amazon in South America are longer too, and wider. But Ganga is special to India. There is something timeless about her. She seems to flow from far back in the past, through the present and into the future.

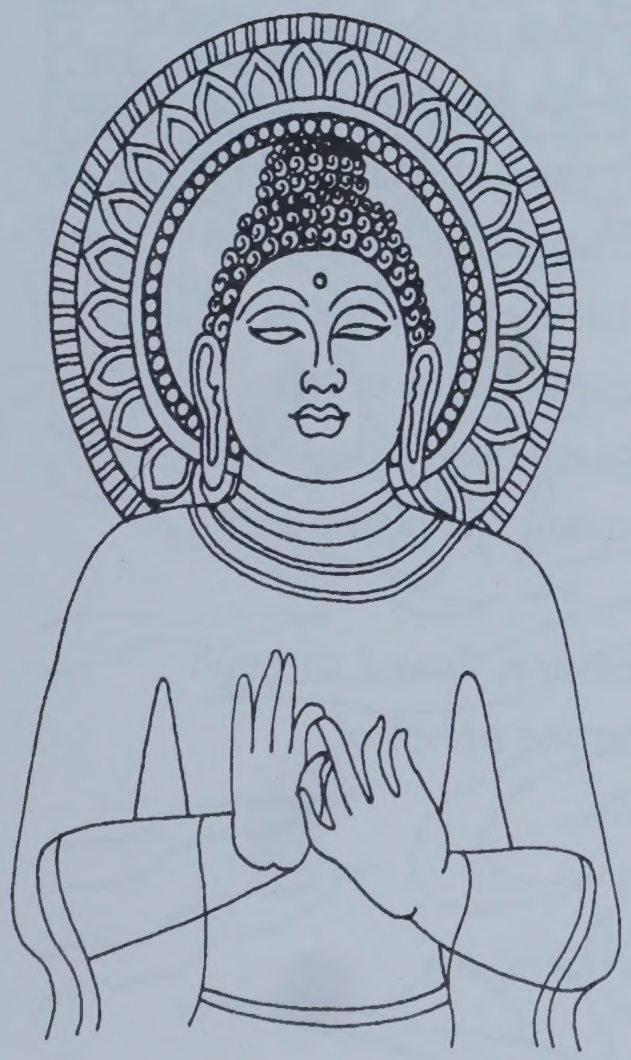
No one knows when she actually began to flow. But as we look at and listen to the sights and sounds along her banks, we get to know many stories — of her birth, and of the history and life of the people living around her. As she rushes, falls and winds her way, her moods change. She can be lively, furious, mysterious, calm, unpredictable . . .

Kingfisher

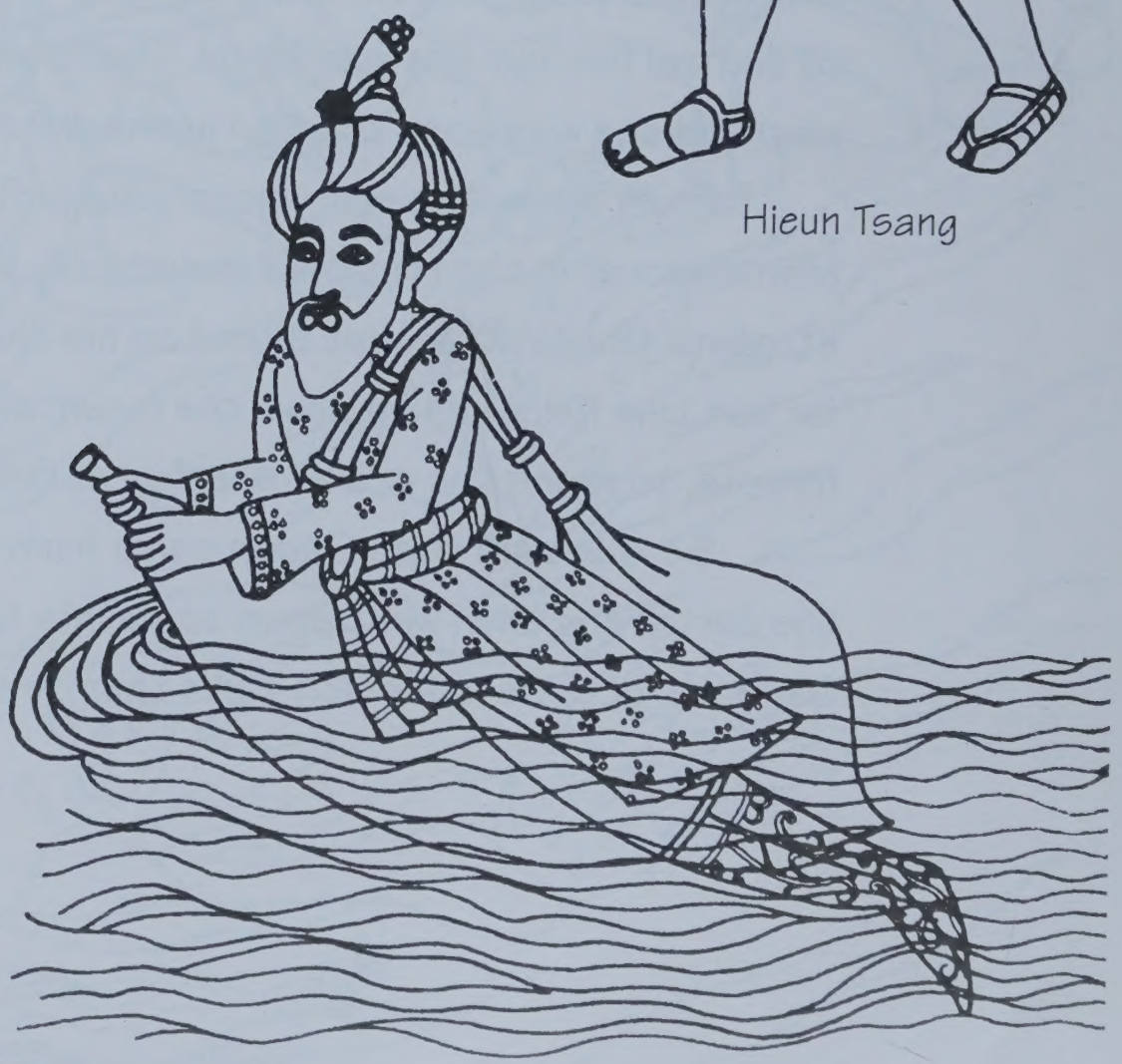


Barge of the Raja of Banaras

Hieun Tsang



The Buddha



Mughal emperor Humayun escapes from Sher Shah Suri,
crossing Ganga on an inflated water-pouch

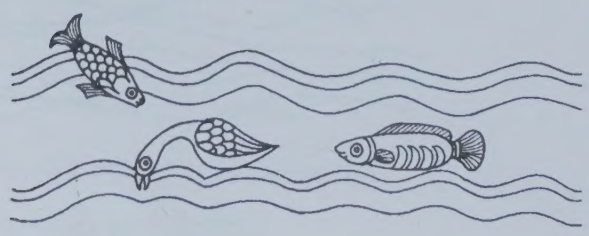
One of the stories takes us back to the time of King Sagara and his 60,001 sons! Sagara had once sent them all to look for a sacred horse which was missing. They found it grazing near Rishi Kapiladeva's ashram in patala — a world believed to be far below ours. Thinking that the rishi had stolen it, they prepared to attack. Kapiladeva was meditating, and was so angry at being disturbed that he burned them all to ashes. Only one brother, Asamanjas, lived to tell King Sagara the story.

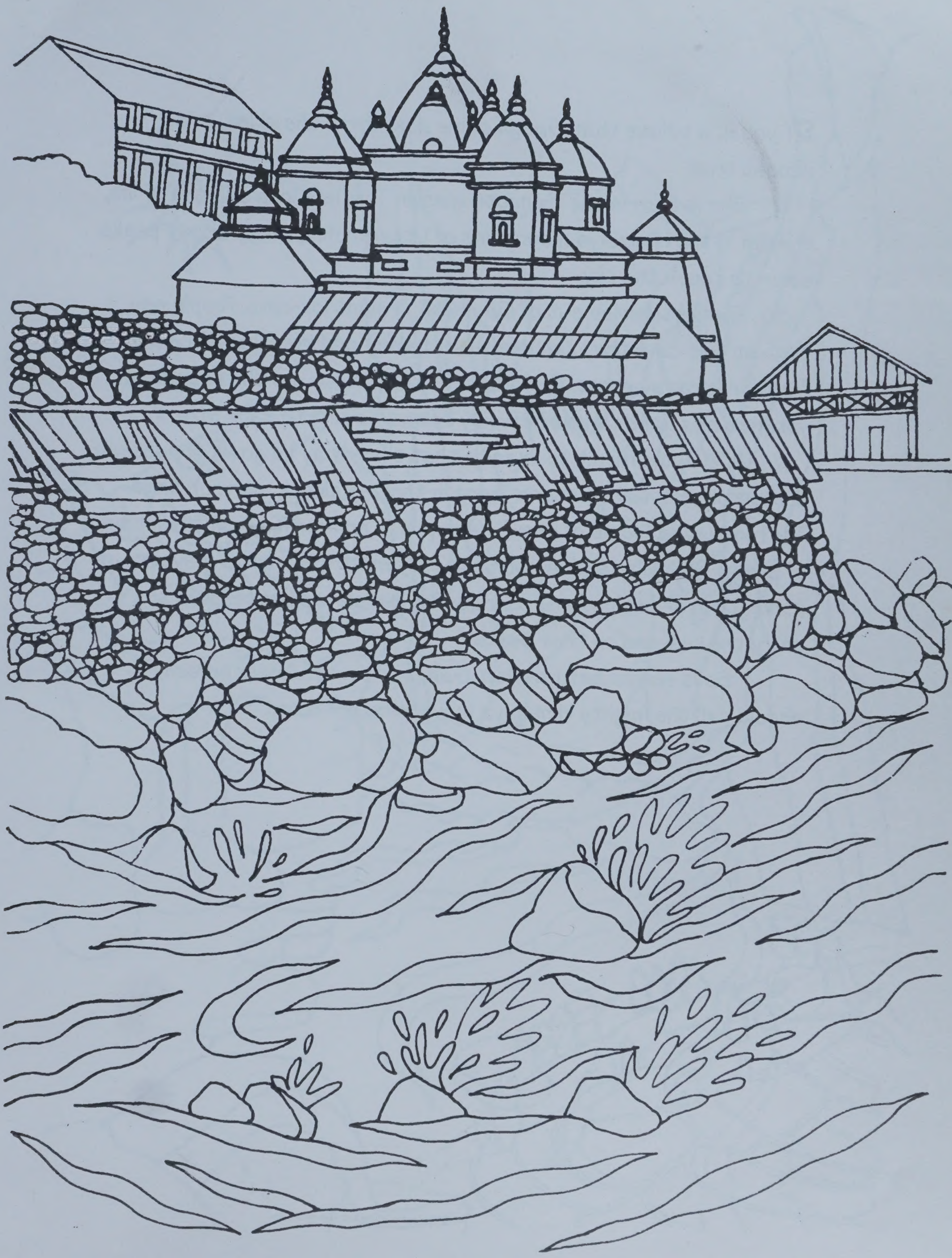
Anshuman, the king's grandson, pleaded with Kapiladeva to bring them back to life. 'Only Ganga can do that,' said the rishi. 'She will wash away their sins and make them immortal.' But Ganga lived up in the heavens and wouldn't come down. After many, many years of prayer, Sagara's great-great-grandson, Bhagiratha, persuaded her to descend.

Kapiladeva had warned that if Ganga came down to earth, she would fall with a dangerous force and sweep everything away. So Bhagiratha prayed to the gods for help. First Brahma and Vishnu tried to control her, but she rushed on. Then Shiva came and stood in her way, and she was soon trapped in the tightly knotted locks of his hair!

From there, the story goes, Ganga flowed calmly into Lake Manasarovar in the Himalaya mountains, branching out into seven streams. Bhagiratha went ahead on his chariot to rip open a passage for her. She followed him down the mountains, through the plains and forests, to reach the sea at the Bay of Bengal.

So it is said that Ganga came from the heavens, flowed through the earth, and then went down to patala to bathe the ashes of Sagara's 60,000 sons and make them immortal.





Temple at Gangotri

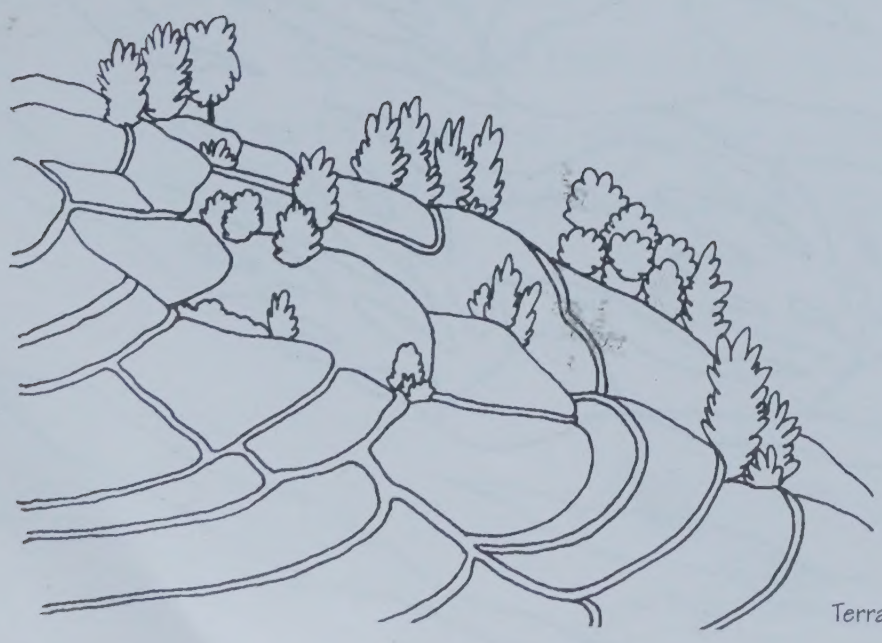
If you now believe that Ganga came down from the skies, it is almost true!

She is born in the Gangotri glacier. This is a long stretch of ice, high up in the Himalaya mountains of Uttaranchal, where snowy peaks seem to touch the sky.

Ganga tumbles out of Gaumukh, a giant ice-cave. People say that at this cave they can hear the shaking and breaking of ice and frost on faraway peaks. Or could it be that these are the sounds of yakshas and gandharvas, heavenly beings, talking to each other?

It is not difficult to imagine that there may be gods, goddesses and other celestial creatures living in these majestic surroundings. The Himalayas, 'home of snow', rise up high and form a beautiful chain of peaks. Their size and awesome beauty make mountains a symbol of strength in mythology and stories. The Himalayas are believed to carry the heavens on their peaks.

So it seems natural that Ganga, a powerful river herself, should call the mighty Himalaya mountains her home.



Terrace-farming on the hillside

Ganga flows out from Gaumukh

The climb up to the Gangotri glacier starts from Rishikesh, a temple town at the foothills of the Himalayas. The route goes up along mountainsides, through dense pine and cedar forests.

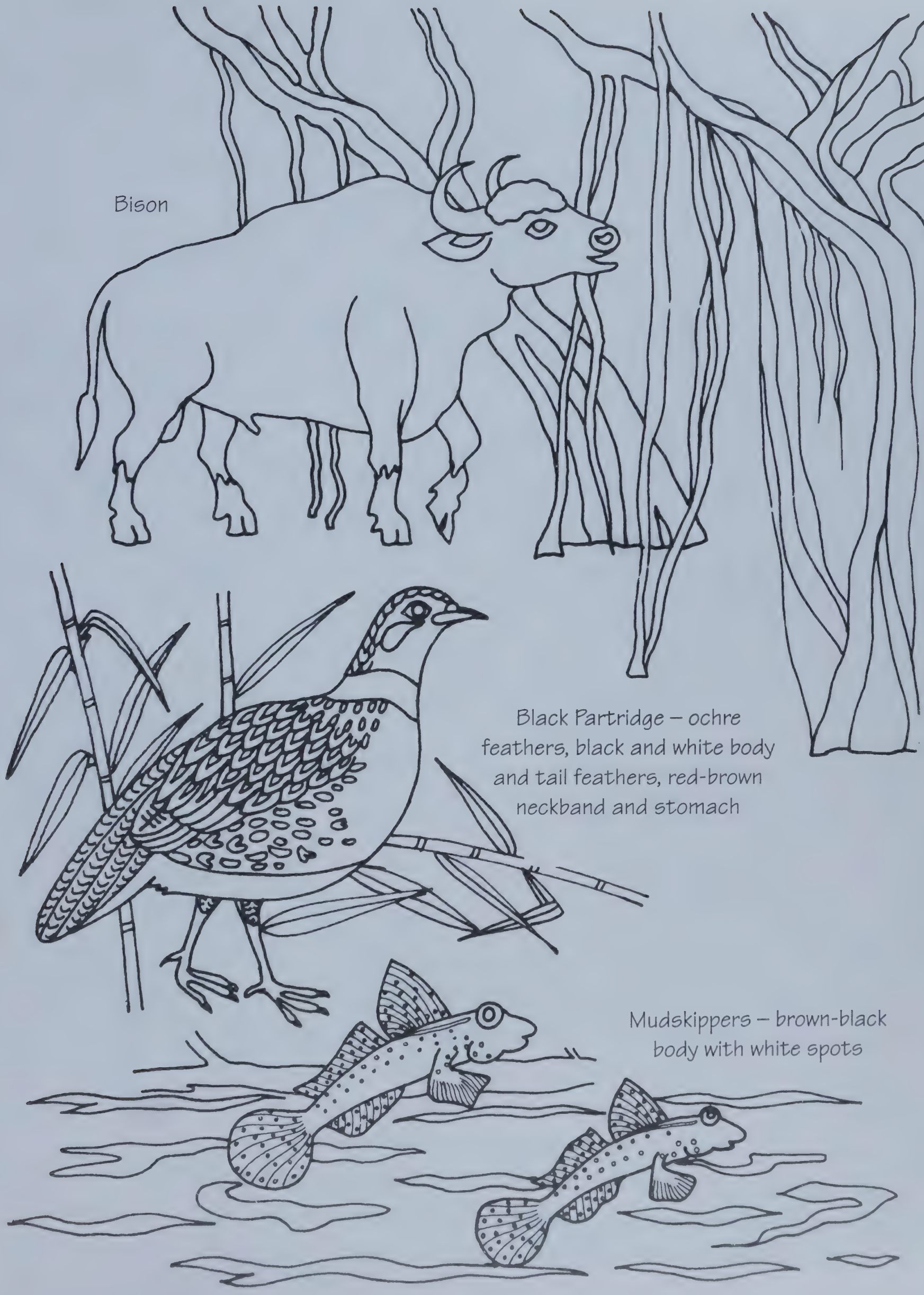
Here in the mountains, the river is called Bhagirathi. She becomes Ganga only after the Alaknanda river joins her at Devprayag. Till about 1940, there were no proper roads here. Even now, travellers have to walk across jhulas, 'swing' rope bridges that sway in the wind, to cross many of the little streams!

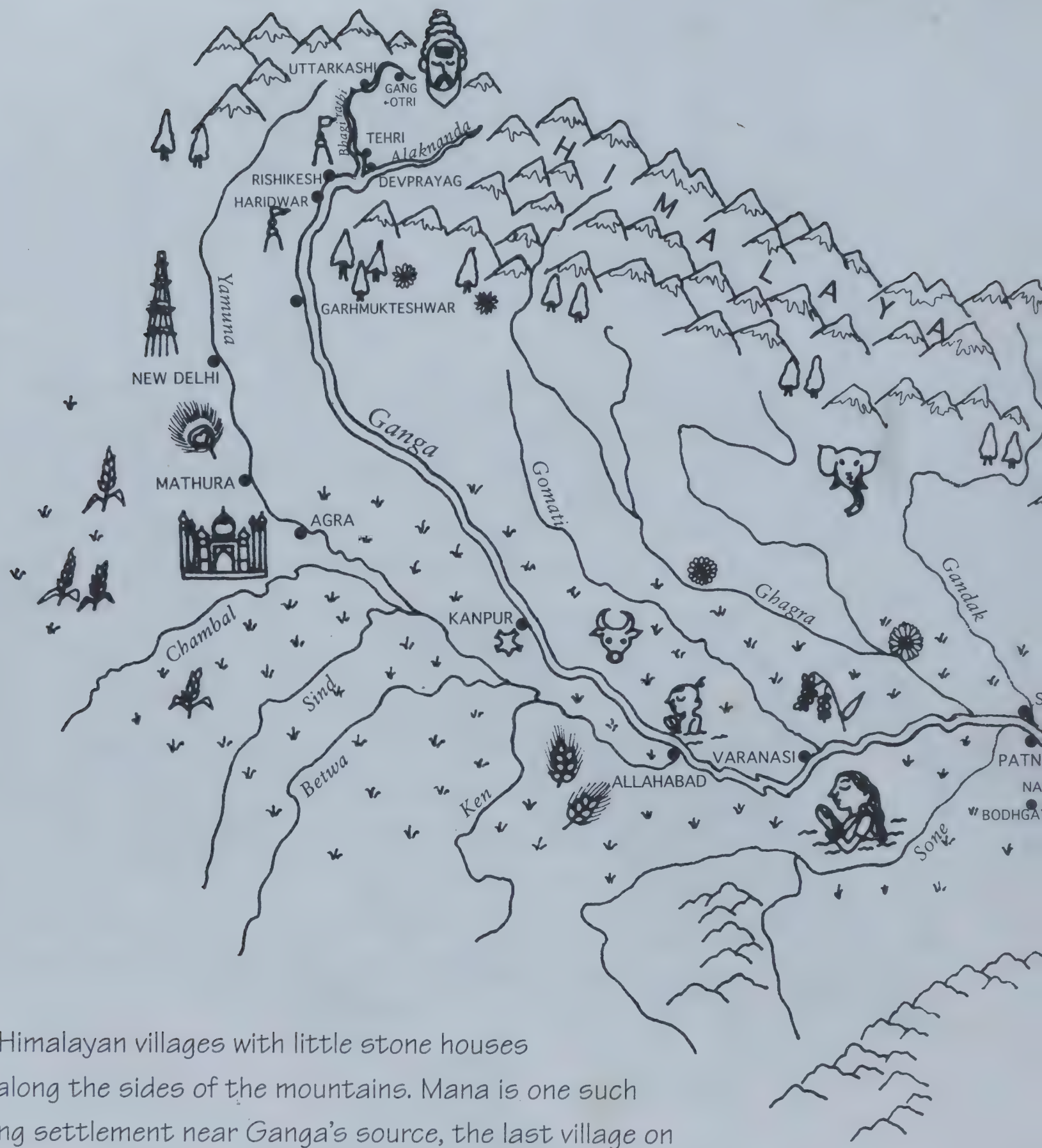
The last stretch can only be walked up. For a long time, the entire trip had to be done on horseback or on foot. It would take one month each way on a horse, or about two months if one walked, to go from Rishikesh to Gangotri.

Downhill from Gaumukh, still high up in the mountains, are groves of short, bushy bhojbasa trees. The trees have a valuable honey-yellow bark which peels off. It was on these sheets of bark that some of our ancient books were written, around 3,000 years ago. Since the trees grow only in these difficult-to-reach valleys of the Himalayas, the groves are considered sacred.

It might be hard to spot the bhojbasa groves, but not the shepherds grazing their sheep along the mountainsides. Braving the freezing cold and icy winds, they camp out in the valleys at a height of 4,000 m, without any tents or even firewood.

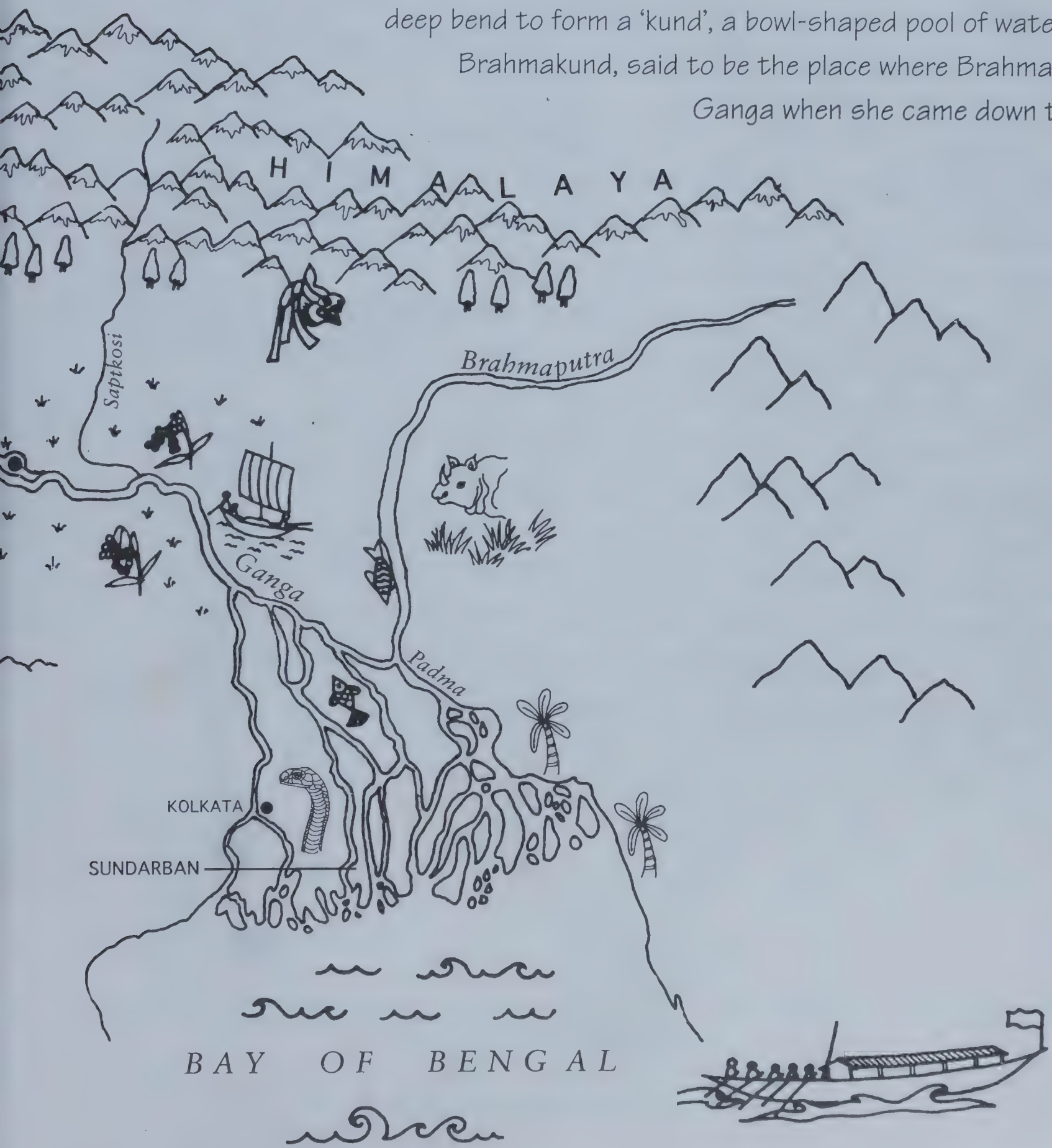
Otter


Bison
Black Partridge – ochre feathers, black and white body and tail feathers, red-brown neckband and stomach
Mudskippers – brown-black body with white spots



Small Himalayan villages with little stone houses stand along the sides of the mountains. Mana is one such charming settlement near Ganga's source, the last village on this side of the border with Tibet. The Marchas or Bhutias who live here are usually shepherds, who sell wool, meat and milk to earn a living. Lower down along the river are small and big towns, such as Badrinath, Uttarkashi, Rishikesh and Haridwar. Most of them are pilgrim centres where people come for a dip in Ganga's waters, which they believe purifies them.

The first town she reaches on leaving the mountains is Rishikesh, meaning 'rishi's hair'. Perhaps it got this name because the many little rivulets that join in here look like the tangled strands on a sage's head! Ganga now grows up to become a real river. She is no more the stream that tumbled through canyons and ravines in the mountains. She is wider and slower. Signs of everyday activity appear along her banks. At Haridwar, the 'gateway to heaven', Ganga enters the plains. Her waters mix with the soil to green the vast flat lands. She takes a deep bend to form a 'kund', a bowl-shaped pool of water. This is Brahmakund, said to be the place where Brahma greeted Ganga when she came down to earth.



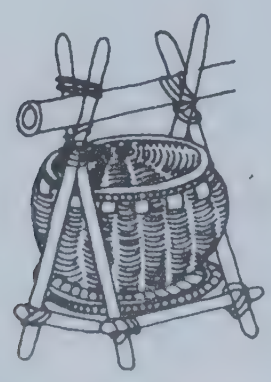
From the north to the south of the state of Uttar Pradesh, and from its west, all the way across the eastern state of West Bengal — that's how far the plains of Ganga stretch.

For a long time, the banks of the river up to Patna were covered in forest. Then in the 14th century AD, during the reign of Sultan Feroze Shah Tughlaq, the forests were cleared. He had a network of canals laid out. Ganga's plentiful waters, which came from melting snow and monsoon rain, irrigated the land.

From then on, this area has become the granary of north India, rich in seasonal crops like rice, millet, barley, wheat, gram and sugarcane. Much later, when the British governed India, their engineers rebuilt most of the canals and added more.

Many of the great Indian kingdoms — of the Mauryas and Guptas, of Harshavardhana, and later the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire — spread across these rich plains.

Distant rulers also dreamed of making the prosperous Ganga basin a part of their empire. During the 11th century AD, Rajendra Chola I came to conquer this region from faraway southern India. He then called himself Gangaikondacholan, 'conqueror of Ganga's lands'. The king had his workmen build a lion-faced well at Gangaikondacholapuram, his new capital in Thanjavur. It was filled with water from the Ganga, carried all the way on elephant-back by the kings he had just defeated!



Basket for carrying Ganga-water

Bathtime for elephants in the river at Sonepur

Prayag, better known as Allahabad, is one of the first big cities on Ganga's plains. Here Ganga is joined by the rivers Yamuna and Saraswati. They are said to weave together like three strands of hair to become triveni, a 'plait'. Saraswati is invisible, believed to flow underground. But it is also likely that she just dried up and doesn't actually exist anymore.

The three rivers mingle at sangam, the 'meeting'. Maha Kumbh Mela, a festival, is held here once every twelve years, and it brings millions of people to Allahabad.

Eastward along the Ganga is the ancient town of Varanasi, said to be the home of Lord Shiva. It is also known as Kashi or Banaras, and is famous for its woven silks and scented oils. The ghats — the long steps on the river bank — attract tourists and a lot of pilgrims.

Ganga now flows her broadest, full and wide. The rivers Sone, Ghagra and Gandak join her near Patna, Bihar's capital city. As Pataliputra, Patna was also the capital of Magadha, Emperor Ashoka's kingdom in the 3rd century BC, and the home of Buddhism. Prince Gautama received enlightenment under the Bodhi tree in nearby Gaya, and became the Buddha. From Pataliputra, missionaries took his message to the world.

Close to Patna and the Ganga's banks is Nalanda, a famous university town of around the 6th century AD. It is now in ruins, but used to be a great centre of learning, with impressive libraries, temples, monasteries and hostels for students.

Juicy watermelons grow on the river-bed

A ghat at Varanasi

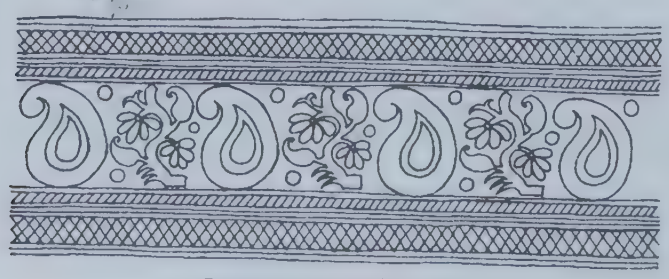
Ganga now branches out into its delta in Bengal. In late August every year, the Bengali Muslim boat-people decorate their crocodile-headed boats and celebrate her during Bera. This is a raft festival that blends Hindu and Muslim customs. Two types of crocodiles, the mugger and the gharial, live here in the river. It is said that the goddess Ganga rides on them through her waters.

Until the mid-19th century, people travelled down the river in boats called bajras. As these boats were slow, travellers could write or paint during a journey, which they often did.

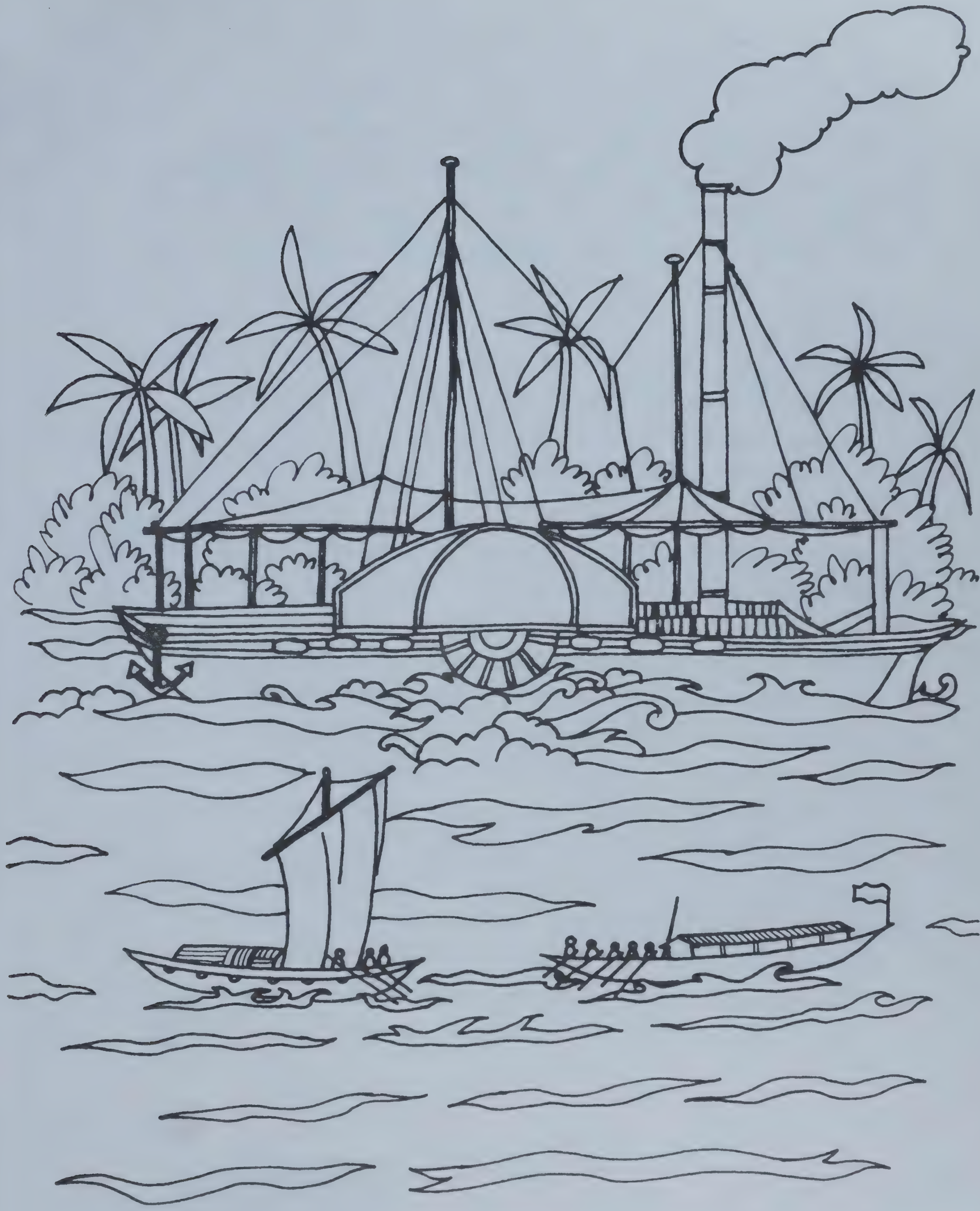
By 1830, came the iron steamboats. They were faster and more comfortable. The British knew that Ganga was the main highway through the north and east. So they used the steamboats to make their presence stronger in this region.

A regular steamer service began between Calcutta and Allahabad in 1834. The trip would have taken three months on a bajra, but now it took three weeks! Steamboats were considered quite expensive, and not many could afford to travel on them. They were used mainly by British officials and rich Indians to carry government and household goods, indigo, silk and opium.

Up in the mountains, where Ganga's waters swirl and form rapids, a very different kind of boat is used today for a popular adventure sport called river rafting. It takes a lot of skill to go through her wild, tricky waters. But for those who are daring, it is an exciting mix of thrills, spills and chills!



Banarasi saree border



Boats on the river

The lower part of Ganga's delta forms the Sundarban. Think of a group of flat islands criss-crossed by a maze of canals, covered with mangrove swamps and trees like bamboo, coconut, tamarind, banana and betel-nut. You have a hot, wet, tropical forest, with a fascinating variety of wildlife.

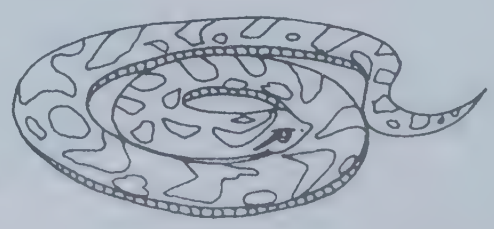
The falling leaves and twigs feed the fish and crabs. These water animals in turn become a feast for other mammals and reptiles — such as dolphins, sharks, otters, monitor lizards, pythons, muggers, gharials and the estuarine crocodile.

Along the river, kingfishers, ospreys, fish-eagles and other birds dive into the water for a bite of fish. Sometimes, you might spot a fish out of water and think it is dead. But it could just leap up and plunge back into the water! This is the mudskipper, an unusual fish that can breathe both in and out of water.

Wild boar and different kinds of deer roam the forests of Sundarban. They make a tasy meal for leopards and the majestic Bengal tiger, which hide in the thick foliage and look out for prey.

In neighbouring Bangladesh, Ganga meets another huge river, the Brahmaputra, which comes down the Assam hills. They flow together into the Bay of Bengal as the river Padma.

The caring Ganga becomes destructive with the monsoons, flooding villages by her side. She also leaves behind thick silt, which makes the soil rich but blocks water channels to the fields and chokes up harbours. Many prosperous ports and cities along Ganga died because her silt blocked their route to the sea.



Python

Mangrove swamp in Sundarban

Foreign visitors have spoken of how Ganga is worshipped in India. The Chinese traveller, Hieun Tsang, saw King Harsha generously distribute wealth at the Kumbh Mela. The celebrations would go on for 75 days! Ibn Batuta, who came from Morocco, writes that even Sultan Mohammad bin Tughlaq and Mughal emperors after him believed that Ganga could cure diseases and wash away sins.

Today her water is unfit for bathing even after sterilisation! Towns and factories along Ganga's banks dirty her waters. Fertilisers used in farmlands, garbage, dead bodies of animals and humans, and millions of gallons of sewage pollute the river. A few projects like Clean Ganga and the Ganga Action Plan have been trying to clean her up, but a lot remains to be done.

The waters near Varanasi once had hundreds of rare, 'blind' freshwater dolphins. They have eyes without lenses, so they can't see but move around by sensing sound. The few that remain now are the lucky ones which have escaped nylon nets and pesticides.

Forests along Ganga's upper course are being felled. This causes floods, and those living along the river have had to move away. A brave group of people came together to start the Chipko movement. To save the deodar trees from being chopped down, they 'cling' to them when they are about to be axed by foresters.

In spite of all the harm being done to her, Ganga still flows, giving all she can to everyone. Can we do something for her in return? Can she be made clean and pure once again, as when she tumbles out of the unspoiled icy cave, where yakshas and gandharvas still talk to one another?

Birds and animals along the river, in a patua painting from Bengal

READ AND COLOUR RIVER STORIES

This is the second set in the series, after Read and Colour Freedom Stories. Balancing simple text with detailed line drawings that can be coloured in by the child, the books introduce 7 to 12 year olds to life in and around some of India's important rivers. Older children will be able to read the text themselves. Younger ones may want the stories read aloud. All children, however, will ask questions. Take time to answer these questions and travel with your child on an interactive journey of learning.

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